

Down with the Upgrade

Barvin Links turned on this Saturday morning, oiling his limbs and gears, and feeling—for the first time in a long time—great. *Victor is going to blow a transistor*, he thought. He imagined Victor's jealous red eyes illuminating as he heard the news. Barvin felt about ready to combust from the sheer anticipation. Normally, he never left the sanctuary of his charging station on the 175th floor of Eclipse Tower, but today he would make the trek to sneer in the face of his pompous best-friend, Victor. Victor was Barvin's same model number, conceived by the same code, two of the many M-171s made by the famed the super computer, Akyrema.

An Akyerma quote hung over Barvin's doorway. *If it looks and thinks like a human, what is it? I'll tell you. It is a human.*

Once inside the city, Barvin kept his vision focused on the sidewalk. Using his peripherals, he navigated the flow of every passerby, a million humanoid robots vectoring in every direction. There were no breathing and eating men left on earth. An older unit, discernable by its gray-toned skin, obstructed Barvin's path, hesitating: Go left? Go right? To which Barvin forcefully extended his right arm to signal his direction. *They all look the same*, he thought, shaking his head. Misshapen nose and unevenly spaced eyes, often one larger than the other; they were uniformly ugly in their deformity.

As Barvin walked into Vito's Restaurant, a news update flashed on telescreen on the wall, arresting his attention. He stopped walking to read the brief. It was relevant. Fifty-something M-15s had just retired outside the LIFE dispensary. Apparently, they had self-retired, claiming that there was no reason to exist with outdated parts. At this time Barvin froze, a software update had come over the city like an earthquake. The telescreen went dark. The

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humanoid woman sitting at the bar, lifting a Coca-Cola to her lips, paused and held the arced bottle. The bartender wiping down the bar stopped wiping. For twenty seconds, not a humanoid in the place moved. They looked like mannequins until the update finished. Barvin became unstuck. His vision faced the telescreen, but he could not remember what he'd been watching. He surveyed the restaurant. For being outside of Manhattan, the Italian-style restaurant with a black ceiling and red walls had charm, albeit a 1950s American knockoff. A well-dressed middle-aged couple of humanoids sat at the bar. The bartender, a slender white humanoid wearing a black bowtie, was now stirring drinks. Two humanoid families were sipping from straws at their tables. Barvin spotted Victor, and he hastened over to his table.

Victor was slurping wine from a straw. His high cheekbones and perfect facial symmetry were another relief for Barvin who found solace in Victor's assembly-line elegance. It was like looking in a mirror. Every generation of Models had a look, and theirs had been manufactured with dark hair and olive-toned skin. Seeing the half-empty wine glass, and realizing that Victor had already started without him, Barvin said "Thanks for waiting."

Victor snorted. "I never keep something fresh waiting," he said. His eye, red and glassy, winked.

"So, did you watch Michael Stacks last night?"

"A connoisseur always watches," said Victor, incredulous at having been asked.

"Michael Stacks had another great run. I saw his record setting run back in '12."

That was back in the year 3112. A ticket to a Michael Stacks run in 3172 cost a year of Barvin's salary. Barvin asked, "Really?"

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“Yeah,” said Victor, pausing to slurp the bottom residue of the glass through the straw. “You wouldn’t believe how much faster and fluidly he moves in real life than on the Oculus II.” His right eyebrow twitched. “You watch the runs on the Oculus II, right?”

Barvin felt a flush of jealousy. He didn’t own an Oculus II. His humanoid ears were probably burning red, he thought. Barvin adjusted his settings, lowering his visible expression, which stung. He had wanted Victor to see him gloating. Barvin said, “Is there any other way to watch?”

Barvin looked at the telescreen above the bar. A wine commercial played. A long haired man wearing a robe, his chest hair curling through the opening. He took a long drink from a wineskin. A red drop hit the white robe, and the man, noticing the spill, touched the stain with his finger. The stain disappeared. The man smiled. Bold letters appeared on the screen. *If Our Savior’s Merlot is good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for you.*

“I hear Michael Stacks has a crew of fifty M-172s helping him around the clock,” said Victor. “Imagine... fifty servants.”

“Incredible,” said Barvin, swallowing his annoyance.

“So, how are you?” asked Victor.

“Thirsty,” said Barvin, seating himself next to Victor.

Just then Victor yelled for the bartender, “Oye. My friend’s been here five minutes, and he hasn’t gotten a drink.”

Barvin saw that the male humanoid bartender had been replaced by a beautiful female humanoid, caramel-skinned and curvy. She wore a white blouse and black pants which

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accentuated her thick hips. She glanced up from a book. Reading? Who reads books anymore when all content can be downloaded? Barvin licked his lips lasciviously to signal he would he enjoy her company. She slipped the book into her back pocket, and then sashayed to their table. He thought she had the most beautiful eyes, a blazing golden brown. Looking at her made him feel as though his insides were on fire. She was a new model, a M-172.

She said, “What can I help you boys with?” Her voice sounded like silk.

Barvin silently thanked Akeyrma for designing the two pleasures of wine and women.

“It’s about time,” said Victor, gesturing to his menu. “I’ll have the Our Savior Noir.”

Flustered by the pretty humanoid, Barvin spotted the mole above her lip and realized that she was M-173. He’d only heard rumors about these new models. Oddly, her imperfection made her look, to him, more attractive. She fixed a sweet smile on her attractive mouth. Barvin’s ogling trance broke as Victor called his name, “Barv!”

“Oh,” said Barvin, stuttering. “I—I’ll have the same.”

“Great,” she said. “I’ll put your order in.” Then she spun on her heels, and sashayed back down the bar towards the kitchen. Something inside of him was reaching. Barvin recorded each list of the hip onto his drive.

“What are you looking at?” asked Victor.

“Uh.. her, I guess,” said Barvin. “She’s an M-173.”

Victor grinned. “Just pull her up on the Oculus II.”

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Just then an Emergency report materialized on the telescreen. A mournful, pouty-lipped reporter humanoid said, “It is with great sadness that I announce the death of our beloved Michael Stacks.”

Barvin and Victory gasped.

A knot of sadness seized Barvin’s throat. He felt like he might have cried if his settings were one degree more expressive. He turned to Victor. A water droplet streaked down his synthetic, olive face.

Barvin looked back at the telescreen. “This happens with Michael Stacks’s particular breed, a genetic mutation causing premature rupture of the aorta,” said the reporter. The screen cut to a golden retriever running through an obstacle course.

Hurling.

Leaping.

Careening.

The golden dog.

Barvin watched his hero breezing through the obstacle course. Then the dog seized, toppled off a slanted board obstacle. The dog hit the ground. Rolled onto its side. The humanoid children in the restaurant let out expressive fits of crying. The golden dog was *dead*.

The day could not get any worse for Barvin Link. He felt molten metal forming in his limbs. The only thought it in synthetic brain was—*Will I be refunded?* The great news he was about to tell Victor and gloat over was that he had pledged one billion credits for a lifetime Michael Stacks Sponsorship. He had just lost ninety percent of his savings.

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The M-173 female reappeared with two wine glasses. When she saw their ghastly, pale expressions, she appeared confused. “What’s wrong?”

Barvin, just having lost 1 billion of his company’s dollars, could only point to the telescreen and mouth, “Michael Stacks.”

The pretty humanoid turned to see what had caused the reaction, and when she saw the telescreen, she guffawed. The laugh seized her entire machinery before she caught herself, rubbing her hand down her chest, pretending to smooth her wrinkle-less shirt.

Immediately, whatever affinity Barvin had for the woman turned to hate. “That’s what’s wrong with your kind,” said Barvin. “You’re too ignorant to appreciate the greatness of Michael Stacks.” His look was menacing.

“Excuse me?” said the waitress. In her uncomfortable surprise she began snickering, which only exacerbated the already unhinged Barvin Links.

“Yes,” he said. “Excuse you!” Barvin was now standing, gesticulating with his right fist and yelling: “There will never be another like him!”

The M-173, unable to control herself, began laughing harder.

How dare she? Thought Barvin.

“Barv,” started Victor, but the look of resolve had already settled over Barvin as he cocked his arm back. He hit the side of M-173’s head with his open palm, a meat-slapping echo shot around the restaurant. This scene captured the attention of every patron.

All faces agog.

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The M-173 shrieked. Then she retreated from Barvin, holding the side of the head where she had been struck.

Soon after she disappeared into the kitchen, the bartender barreled out. He was wearing a scowl and a crooked bowtie. He got ahold of Barvin's arms and shoulders and dragged him out of the restaurant. Victor, stunned and stupefied, followed behind, carrying his glass of wine. Victor's red eyes were smiling. The bartender shoved Barvin onto the sidewalk outside. The New York City streets bustled with activity, humanoid citizens coming and going. They swarmed around the disturbance.

From the ground, Barvin yelled. "M-173s will replace us all, you fools!"